

## CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION: AN ENGLISH SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

*Grand Strategy determines the ultimate goals and interests of a state. It has long-term effects on state policies. With the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China has emerged as a regional and global power. After entering the new era of development, China set specific goals and decided to achieve them, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. These goals are to convert China into a prosperous society, increase per capita income at par with developed states and realize modernization. In 2013, Xi Jinping announced China's Grand Strategy, while stating that the period extended to 2020 (and beyond) is the era of strategic opportunity for China. This article discusses China's Grand Strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. First, it conceptualizes Chinese strategy by focusing on its main objectives and interests. Secondly, it analyses its components while identifying how China is utilizing its economic, political, diplomatic, and security means to secure its interests in the region and maintain regional order. It also examines Chinese foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region according to the institutions of international society described by Hadley Bull.*

**Keywords:** Grand Strategy, Asia-Pacific, Maritime Silk Road, Balance of Power, Diplomacy.

### Introduction

**T**he term 'Grand Strategy' has evolved over a period but has not been defined in its true sense. Few definitions of Grand Strategy exist, but they are different and demonstrate diverse meanings of the term.<sup>1</sup> Grand Strategy is often confused with the term 'strategy' in international relations; whereas, it is different. Grand Strategy determines the ultimate goals and interests of the state, its policies to achieve them, its diplomatic, economic, and military strategies to deal with opportunities and challenges, and its ways to interact with other states and non-state actors.<sup>2</sup> In a broader perspective, Grand Strategy has long-term effects on state policies and interests, which should exist not for years but decades.<sup>3</sup> Policymakers prioritize state goals and long-term objectives to secure state interests with available resources. They determine state policies to achieve long-term objectives instead of reacting on day-by-day or case-by-case issues.<sup>4</sup>

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The significant characteristic of Grand Strategy is that it is not necessarily on papers or labelled as a Grand Strategy; it can be the decision of state leaders. They deliberately make some policies that are in the best interest of state relations. Whether the state has an announced Grand Strategy or not, all leaders set some goals to achieve them, and the state adopts methods to secure its interests and avoid confrontation with other states.<sup>5</sup> Strategists like Edward Luttwak argued that all states have Grand Strategy, either they know it or not.<sup>6</sup> William Martel further suggests that all states must have a Grand Strategy, clear goals and resources, including guidelines for implementation.<sup>7</sup> This paper, therefore, examines China's Grand Strategy by focusing on its main objectives and interests. It analyses how China utilizing its economic, political, diplomatic, and security means to secure its interests in the Asia-Pacific region. The analysis is based on the model of Institutions given by Hadley Bull.

### **China's Grand Strategy**

The first step to analyse China's Grand Strategy is to know about its interests and objectives. State interests remain at the top of policies, and objectives are the ends that, ultimately, the state wants to achieve. However, Grand Strategy does not include each interest or objective of a state as they could be numerous, so leaders choose which are vital and make policies to achieve them.<sup>8</sup> In the case of China's Grand Strategy, the leadership clearly announced its objectives and specific time frame; for instance, the Communist Party of China (CPC) states that the accomplishment of communism is the highest goal of the party. They also argue that China is at the primary level of socialism and will remain so for some years to come.

With the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China emerged as a regional and global power. After entering the new era of development, China set specific goals and decided to achieve them during 2021-24. These goals are to convert China into a prosperous society, increase per capita income at par with developed states and realize modernization.<sup>9</sup> In 2013, Xi Jinping (General Secretary of CPC) announced China's Grand Strategy. He stated that the period extended to 2020 (or beyond) is the era of 'strategic opportunity' for China. For achieving long-term goals, China must be stable and develop domestically. On the external front, China should establish good relations with its neighbours by establishing close economic ties and good political relations through diplomatic channels along with security cooperation.<sup>10</sup> In short, China should treat its neighbouring or regional states safer and like a friend. On the other hand, Xi Jinping expressed that a friendly neighbouring policy does not mean that China would sacrifice its national interests, sovereignty, or territorial integrity. It can never be compromised and would remain at the top of Chinese priorities.<sup>11</sup> China's policy towards the Asia-Pacific region shows that, in the coming years, China's economic and military growth would one day convince its neighbours to establish good relations with China and accommodate Chinese interests in the region instead of confronting them.

## **Core Objectives of China's Grand Strategy**

China's Grand Strategy has many long and short-term goals to achieve, but China's economic integration, defending China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and control over near seas are the main objectives of China's Grand Strategy in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>12</sup> The topmost objective of China is to save its national interests by maintaining good relations and avoid confrontation with the existing superpower (the US) in the Asia-Pacific region.

## **Regional Economic Integration**

In October 2013, Chinese leaders Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang visited Southeast Asian countries to promote the establishment of the new Maritime Silk Road. This move clearly shows that China's objective is to sustain regional economic integration. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) links the Pacific and Indian Oceans and creates free trade zone along with the Chinese periphery. China officially presented BRI as the regional economic and trade strategy. Not only had this, but China also called for multilateral regional infrastructure development led by China for the economic prosperity of the region. Along with BRI and other economic developments, China-funded \$100 million to initiate the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to develop infrastructure within the region.<sup>13</sup> China also established a Silk Road Fund with \$40 billion assets for regional infrastructure development.<sup>14</sup> In addition to all these developments, China managed to provide development funds to the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries. BRICS Development Bank contains assets of \$100 billion.<sup>15</sup>

China has funded major infrastructure projects in the region to connect China with regional countries like the Nanning-Singapore Economic Corridor that would link China with Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore via road and railway.<sup>16</sup> The Mekong Project established links between Yunnan province of China and six nations of the Mekong River Basin. Under its economic and trade policy, China desires to connect with the region. It established Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), including 10 ASEAN countries, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and India. By February 2020, 15 Asia-Pacific countries have added to it. China wanted to make RCEP a forum to integrate trade agreements between ASEAN nations and their dialogue partner into a single agreement.<sup>17</sup>

China is promoting free trade agreements between China and South Korea besides trilateral arrangements between Japan, South Korea, and China. Its policy to develop economically and involve regional states in China-led regional economic forums is to help regional states in making progress but at the same time not to pose threats to Chinese interests in the region. In other words, China is adopting a carrot stick diplomacy pattern to secure its interests. This strategy of China remained successful between the 1990s and early 2000s. China set political differences with

regional states aside and emphasized economic cooperation while securing its core interests.

### **Control over the Near Seas**

China is progressing not only economically but also militarily. The objective of military modernization is to prevent foreign powers especially the US to intervene in the near seas of China. For this reason, China is focusing more on enhancing its capability to counter intervention or conduct regional military operations. The purpose is to secure the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Yellow Sea from foreign intervention. To support this counter-intervention strategy, China has developed Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A<sub>2</sub>/AD) weapons. These weapons include ground and air-launched cruise missiles, short and medium-range ballistic missiles, anti-ship ballistic missiles, advanced fighter aircraft, air refuelling capabilities, and integrated defence systems, etc. China can utilize these capabilities anywhere in the region like Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands where China and Japan are in conflict, but China's top priority is to use these weapons to slow down or contain US intervention in the Taiwan Strait conflict.<sup>18</sup>

### **China's Sovereignty Claim**

Since dynasties rule in China, it has been considering securing sovereignty and territorial integrity as one of the most important goals of its foreign or domestic policies. Today, China is actively asserting its territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. China claims Senkaku/Diaoyu islands as its integral part, whereas Japan claims the same.<sup>19</sup> In 2008, China, for the first time, dispatched vessels into the 12nm water around the islands.<sup>20</sup> In 2012, after Japan took a step to purchase these islands, China seized the opportunity by launching protocols not only in the contiguous zone but in the territorial waters too. To establish Chinese jurisdiction and challenge Japanese control, China increased its presence in the region. In 2013, China announced the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea to increase pressure on Japan and was forced to officially acknowledge it as a territorial dispute between both of them.<sup>21</sup> China took these steps owing to its rising power and a relative decline in Japanese power.

On the other hand, China reportedly retreated from the verbal agreement with the Philippines in the South China Sea.<sup>22</sup> It seized the control over Shoal and closed the entry of distant fishermen in that area. Before 2012, they agreed to a peaceful withdrawal of their vessels from Scarborough. China also put hydrocarbon blocks between the Chinese claimed areas and EEZ under 200 nm announcing military and administrative districts in the contested region. It shows China's dedication to defending its national interests in the South China Sea.<sup>23</sup> China adopts a salami-slicing strategy in the East and South China Seas and does not want others to interfere in its claimed territories.<sup>24</sup> China sometimes uses the economy as a means of coercion; for instance, in 2010, when Japan arrested a Chinese fishing boat captain, China put

restrictions on exporting rare earth minerals to Japan. Similarly, China forced the Philippines to withdraw its vessels from Scarborough Shoal by barring imports of fruits from Manila.<sup>25</sup> China's growing economic and military capabilities allow it to secure its interests in the region.

## **Threats to China's Grand Strategy**

To understand China's Grand Strategy, one must understand domestic and international challenges to China and its rise as a global power. The foreign policy of any country serves its domestic interests at the international level. Therefore, Chinese scholars consider that China's Grand Strategy is facing challenges at domestic and international levels.<sup>26</sup>

### **Domestic Threats**

Mostly, foreign policy analysts do not pay much attention to domestic threats to Chinese interests as they pay more attention to its international challenges.<sup>27</sup> Chinese experts also spend much time analysing foreign relations and ignore domestic issues. It is a fact that while analysing events like China's rise or its Grand Strategy, both Chinese and foreign analysts should pay due attention to the domestic issues because without counting internal problems, analysing the present or future of any strategy is impossible. Zheng Bijian, a Chinese theorist, stated that China is facing three biggest development challenges; first, limited supply of indigenous natural resources; second, environment issues; and third is the lack of coordination between economic and social development.

Wen Jiabao, former Premier of the People's Republic of China, once explained Chinese economic growth as unbalanced, unsustainable, and unsteady.<sup>28</sup> The most difficult challenge is 'unbalanced' because China is making enormous economic growth; therefore, uneven benefits or wealth distribution divide the country into two classes. The less well-off or proletariat class is unhappy due to which different incidents take place and causing social instability. Chinese leaders are concerned about the situation, thus, making policies to handle such issues as they could lead to political unrest. An unstable society would have impacts on foreign policy or the Grand Strategy of China. The other domestic threats to the Chinese Grand Strategy are corruption, under-provision, unemployment, environmental degradation, and social welfare goods, etc. Scholars argued that the difference between educated and uneducated and town dwellers and villagers could trigger political and economic disruption in China. They added that China's one-child policy became the reason for gender imbalance, and the unstrained economic growth of China is causing environmental degradation. If China does not arrest such issues immediately, it can create a hurdle in future growth and achieving objectives of its Grand Strategy.<sup>29</sup>

## International Threats

International threats are the factors that Chinese leaders see as the biggest hurdle in achieving their objectives. Throughout history, the world has faced wars, especially two world wars that brought nothing but destruction. China has also faced Cold War and other limited wars with the regional states. War is considered a potential threat to the international peaceful environment, and China, at the same time, takes it as the greatest threat to its progress. Chinese officials are optimistic that China does have the ability to avoid war or any confrontation. However, if war breaks out or a conflict emerges, it would damage the Chinese modernization process. Although the possibility of a war is unlikely in this globalized world, China should secure the objectives of its Grand Strategy.

China considers the US and its allies the biggest threat to the Chinese Grand Strategy. To achieve its objective, cordial relations with the US are imperative, but still, China is not much clear about the US intentions. The first perception is because of the ideological differences. The US wants to undermine CPC rule in China, and China thinks that the US seeks to maintain its power status in the East Asian region.<sup>30</sup> The US and its allies desire to contain China as the US did with the USSR during Cold War. Presently, most Chinese neighbours are US allies, and they are confused about China's rise as a regional power and what policy China would adopt towards them after having enough strength in the region. China does not want to play the Cold War power politics and at the same time against the hegemon conception.<sup>31</sup>

Dai Bingguo, a Chinese diplomat, stated that China does not want to be a hegemon and will not compete with the regional states to become a hegemon or dominate regional states for becoming more powerful. He further added that China does not want to follow the pattern of the Monroe Doctrine or the concept of Joint Hegemony.<sup>32</sup> It shows that China wants to warn the US and its allies not to contain China, and neither are the Chinese in favour of adopting the Cold War mentality. China expects the same from regional states to avoid confrontation. Dai favoured this argument when he said that “those who still have the Cold War mentality and in opposition of China, they sell weapons to Taiwan.” He further stated that “we hope that other countries in the region will not adopt any policy to harm or contain China.”<sup>33</sup>

Chinese are very much aware that hostile relations with any great power, especially the US, would be a grave threat to Chinese interests and in achieving strategic goals of China's Grand Strategy. Hostility would first lead towards war, and secondly, if it would not, it diverts Chinese attention from modernization to arms race. For instance, the Soviet-Chinese confrontation during Cold War gave nothing but led to an arms race and damaged economic growth. Therefore, any instability at China's periphery could affect its Grand Strategy. For ages, any hostile activity in the neighbourhood of China ultimately harmed its interests and brought instability to China either in terms of Chinese involvement in the international conflict or caused

instability in its territory. In recent years, researchers and officials have been focusing more on the non-traditional threats to the Chinese Grand Strategy instead of traditional ones and how they influence it.

### **Institutions by Hedley Bull and China's Grand Strategy**

The future of the Asia Pacific connects with China's peaceful rise. China's Grand Strategy shows that China has taken responsibility for the development and prosperity of this region. It proceeds with the economic development of regional states through dialogue to get mutual benefits while ensuring security. China's behaviour towards regional politics is because of the interpretation of a new regional political environment, which China has learned from its cultural legacies. China's perception of international society is neither like a realist nor idealist, instead to secure Chinese interests maintaining regional order as described by Hedley Bull. China's adoption of institutions or maintaining order is not simplistic rather the consequences of historical events. Bull argues that the common goals and interests of states in international society drive them to set or follow common rules under institutions, and consequently, the goal 'order' is provided. For Bull, Balance of Power, War, Great Powers, International Law and Diplomacy play the role of institutions.<sup>34</sup>

### **China and Balance of Power**

Balance of Power is one of the most important institutions of international society as well as Europeans. China used this as a tool to secure its interests and make its survival possible. During the European state system, states adopted the same measure to protect themselves in complex international systems. Under the European state system, states were independent in deciding their military and civilian affairs, but still, they had promised each other's that they would not cause trouble between neighbours in securing their interests. Yen-Ping Hao claims that during the Qing Dynasty, China adopted the Western International system.<sup>35</sup>

Whether China is adopting Balance of Power as an institution of international society or not is debatable, especially concerning China's Grand Strategy and its intentions to secure its interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Li Hong Zhang states that during European international society, great powers signed treaties to help small powers; and it could have adopted in the case of Korea, a small state in East Asia.<sup>36</sup> If regional powers signed a treaty to protect Korea, it could peacefully continue with its trade activities and, in return, will give a handsome benefit to all states. China showed interest in adopting a balance of power as an institution to secure its interest while cooperating with other regional states. China knows that its interests, especially security interests, are interlinked with Korean Security. Its adoption of a balance of power as an institution shows that China wants to maintain a balance in which it would protect and respect the independence of other regional states and play a role in maintaining order through institutions cooperating with other regional states.

China's policy on Asia-Pacific states that China should focus on building the partnership and strengthen the political foundation for peace and stability of the region.<sup>37</sup> It added that China should reject the Cold War mentality and work together to bring stability to the region and big states should respect others' interests and show positive behaviour. At the same time, small states should not be a part of any camp. China wants to establish a new model of international relations which focuses more on cooperation instead of competition. China, under its Grand Strategy, is aspiring for a community of shared future.

### **War as a Tool to Establish Peace**

Chinese perception about war is as same as the rest of the countries. War has been a tool of coercion in history. During the European international society, China has remained a victim and did not get anything constructive from war. As the war has been destructive all the time, but still as per Grotian concept, it can play a role in maintaining justice: "Peace is the norm and war is the violation or exception; peace is logically before the war and war is the necessary evil, to be minimized as far as possible. War is a necessary element because it is the only means of justice when there is no political superior."<sup>38</sup>

According to this statement, war is somehow imperative to maintain justice in international society. However, it depends on how much a country is strong enough to protect international law. China in the Asia-Pacific region is facing several threats and challenges to its national security. Its most significant strategic task is to build a defensive line, which would provide security to China and maintain regional peace and stability. In the case of China's military modernization, it follows principles of coexistence, military exchanges, non-aligned, non-confrontational, etc. China has increased its cooperation with other states' armed forces based on equality and mutual benefits.<sup>39</sup> China has also intensified cooperation in its border areas on maritime security, participated in UN peacekeeping missions, international counter-terrorism cooperation, and conducted relevant joint exercises and training with other regional countries to maintain peace in Asia-Pacific and avoid war. China would use this institution, if necessary, to maintain the international order.

### **China and Great Power Mechanism**

The Chinese view of the role played by great power has been mixed throughout history. China has witnessed such a role from both sides. During the European international society, European powers hold a position to balance relations between other states. They benefited to the detriment of other weak states like Turkey. But on the other hand, China had seen great power as a danger to its survival, not the guarantor of peace. China considered the actions of European international society not morally justified as they were securing maximum profit from China by using force. Analysing China as a regional or rising global power, any conclusion would be premature. However, Chinese intentions as per the Grand Strategy towards Asia-



Pacific reflect that China considers the role of great power as an institution, and it plays a role in making the region more stable by cooperating with regional powers and weak states. China's cooperation is not only on the economic front but also militarily and diplomatically for securing its interests while making the region and regional states more prosperous and developed.<sup>40</sup>

## **Rule of International Law**

China acknowledged international law as an institution in 1864 when it secured a diplomatic victory against Europe.<sup>41</sup> This development changed the Chinese perception of international law. They started considering it as an important institution maintaining world peace and stability. Dong Xun explained that "so many nations exist outside of China if there is no law to regulate them, how this notion of a nation could be possible."<sup>42</sup> Despite such belief, China did not enjoy international law as an institution. Mainly two factors were responsible for this; first, China did not consider the unequal treatment of Europeans as a threat. China took very few steps to make use of international law to improve its position internationally. Secondly, China could not compete with Europe, so they avoided conflict with the European states.

Previously, China had little faith in international law as it considered that this institution was securing the interests of great powers. However, after rising as great power, China has admitted that states should follow the rule of law to live in peace. China believes that norms and rules of international law are according to the UN charter and widely accepted. As per the Chinese perspective, rules of international law must be formulated after the consent of all states before implementing at the regional or international level.<sup>43</sup> In 1954, China, India, and Myanmar initiated the principle of peaceful coexistence to practice the rule of international law. In this regard, China now has access to almost all inter-governmental international organizations along with 400 plus treaties. To manifest its commitment to maintaining security and order in the Asia-Pacific region, China chaired the 2014-meeting at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium for adopting advance code for unplanned encounters at sea. China with ASEAN countries has also decided to continue implementing the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and pledged earlier conclusion of the code of conduct. China is showing concerns regarding rules on regional integration besides focusing on Cyber and Outer Space security.<sup>44</sup>

## **Diplomacy as an Instrument of Peace**

In the European International Society, diplomats had coercive policies to secure their national interests and contributing less towards maintaining peace. China was of the view that they were securing their state interests at any cost. At that time, diplomatic activities were used as a tool of war instead of peace, and this notion of diplomacy was different from the Grotius school of thought. Wang about diplomats stated that "diplomats use their brushes to battle, tongue to battle and their mind to battle as well."<sup>45</sup> After recent developments at the international level, diplomacy has

played a significant role in maintaining peace and order at the international level. Now the Chinese perception of diplomacy has changed, and China has adopted bilateral and multilateral tracks of diplomacy. To make the Asia-Pacific region more stable and peaceful, China initiated Six-Party Talks, China-ASEAN Ministerial Dialogue on Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation, and Xiangshan Forum (name a few) to establish relations and sort out problems diplomatically.<sup>46</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The above-mentioned discussion shows that English school provides the best explanation for Chinese behaviour towards the Asia-Pacific region. The Chinese approach towards the regional order is neither realist nor idealist, rather a way between both to secure national interests and maintain regional peace. China has a clear and coherent Grand Strategy, under which it is spending more on military modernization and maritime security to defend its security interest besides the development of the region. To achieve such goals, China is trying hard to maintain peace and stability in the region by avoiding escalation of any military conflict. Diplomatically, China has successfully convinced regional states that China would not harm their interests and contribute towards regional peace and stability. China's BRI as a part of its Grand Strategy is enhancing economic and domestic growth and helping in bypassing potential threats in the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. It provides alternative routes to fulfil China's energy needs. Many factors can influence the Chinese Grand Strategy, just like other states' response towards its shift in the balance of power, change in the international order, and leadership influence over the policies.

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